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ABSTRACT

Within the last 5 years, policymakers and practitioners have confronted the challenge of replacing many retiring educational leaders. To address this issue, standards for educators themselves have been proposed, some modeled around those of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). Attention is also turning to advanced certification to recognize expert leadership. Educational leadership is also undergoing redefinition as leaders immerse themselves in the "core technology" of teaching and learning, use data to make decisions, and align staff development with student learning needs. Distributed leadership, where school leadership responsibilities are taken on by other school staff members, enhances the school's effectiveness and relieves some of the principal's burdens. Educational leadership development occurs now through formalized mentoring programs. A "curriculum" for leadership is also under development, in which best-practice models are integrated with advanced certification programs. State support can make a difference in leadership preparation by pointing a direction and getting priorities; expanding the candidate pool; enhancing administrator training and professional development; setting licensure, certification, and accreditation requirements; enhancing the conditions of practice; and allocating legal authority. Efforts to improve leadership are complex and multilayered, but they have one overarching theme: Effective leadership is defined by student learning. (Contains 13 references.) (RT)

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Trends in School Leadership

By Larry Lashway

Within the last five years, policymakers and practitioners have confronted the challenge of replacing many retiring educational leaders. Districts have fewer qualified applicants to fill positions requiring an increasingly sophisticated set of skills to deal with everything from school safety to standards-driven accountability.

The recent passage of the No Child Left Behind Act has turned up the heat even more by putting the full weight of federal policy behind the accountability movement, mandating that schools bring *all* children—including racial minorities, English-language learners, and students with disabilities—to an adequate level of progress.

In response, policymakers, researchers, and school leaders themselves have scrutinized the job, asking what skills are most essential and formulating recommendations for reshaping the profession. While consensus remains elusive, several persistent themes have emerged.

What Standards Guide the Work of School Leaders?

With the nationwide emphasis on standards-based accountability, it was inevitable that reformers would propose standards for educators themselves. In recent years, consensus has been building around the standards of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), which have guided certification reform in many states (1996). In addition, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recently aligned its accreditation standards for leadership-training programs with ISLLC (National Policy Board for Educational Administration 2002).

The ISLLC standards are premised on the centrality of student learning as the measure of educational success. Each standard begins with the phrase, "An administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by...." The expectations themselves focus on nurturing a vision, sustaining a growth-oriented school culture, managing the organization effectively, collaborating with families and community, acting with integrity, and participating in the larger social and cultural context.

Attention is also turning to advanced certification to recognize expert leadership. Using the model provided by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), a number of organizations have launched an effort to develop national certification for school leaders (Jeff Archer 2002).

Under the proposal, administrators would earn advanced certification through an exhaustive regimen of tests, simulations, portfolios, and self-analysis. As in the NBPTS model, this certification would not be directly tied to state licensure, but would offer a nationally recognized distinction and would send a strong signal that initial preparation is only the beginning of the learning process (David Mandel 2000).

Although current standards are having a significant impact on leadership preparation, they have critics. C. M. Achilles and William Price (2001) argue that the ISLLC standards fail to identify a distinctive, research-based body of knowledge that would help leaders decide *what* to do, not just how to do it. Fenwick English (2002) has leveled similar criticism concerning the NCATE standards, viewing them as an attempt to force-fit healthily diverse programs into a standardized model. Nonetheless, most policymakers and practitioners seem confident that judicious use of the standards can reshape school leadership.

How Is Instructional Leadership Being Defined?

When the school-reform movement began in the 1980s, the first consequence for school leaders was pressure to put student learning at the center of their jobs. Today, instructional leadership remains a dominant theme, but it is taking a much more sophisticated form.

Initially, administrators qualified as instructional leaders simply by paying attention to instruction: setting curricular goals, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, instructional leaders immerse themselves in the "core technology" of teaching and learning, use data to make decisions, and align staff development with student learning needs. The Education Commission of the States, in analyzing how the No Child Left Behind Act will affect leaders, noted that they not only need a sophisticated understanding of assessment, they should be master teachers (or at least recruit master teachers) so assessment data can be used intelligently (Katy Anthes 2002).

Unlike the 1980s, which dealt in images of lonely principals riding herd on the staff, today's best-practice districts are weaving learning into the very fabric of the organization. Elaine Fink and Lauren Resnick (1999) have described the comprehensive approach used by New York City's District Two. Central-office supervisors are expected to model instructional leadership by engaging principals in intensive, focused examination of learning and teaching. They do so with monthly conferences, support groups, peer observation, and periodic "walk-throughs" of each school that lead to evaluation, dialogue, and reflective analysis.

Principals themselves must engage their teachers in much the same way. Instructional improvement presents leaders with a complex challenge, requiring them to *understand* good teaching in the classroom and to *be* good teachers in working with their staff.

How Is Leadership Distributed?

Next to "crisis," the word most commonly attached to school leadership in recent years has been "impossible." Often portrayed as the single most important person in the school, the principal gets the call whenever a new reform is advocated. Increasingly, leaders are hitting the wall.

Cognizant of the high stress, and squeezed by the apparent leadership shortage, policymakers and practitioners are beginning to argue that leadership should be *distributed* throughout the school rather than vested in one position.

In some cases, this may simply be a matter of "unbundling" the job description and giving other staff members some of the principal's current responsibilities (Diana Pounder and Randall Merrill 2001). A principal might hand off managerial tasks to the assistant principal; a large school could assign several "subprincipals" to different grade levels; or administrators could simply rotate extra-

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curricular assignments so each preserves a semblance of home life. But whatever strategies are used, Pounder and Merrill argue that "no one person should be expected to provide direct oversight for all school dimensions and activities."

Distributed leadership is more, however, than just a reshuffling of assignments; it is a change in culture. Richard Elmore (2000) points out that the real work of reform ultimately occurs in the classroom, where teachers interact with students. Principals cannot directly control those interactions, but they can guide it in certain directions by "enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expections around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result."

Thus, distributing leadership means enlisting the capabilities of others in a common cause. When this is done effectively, advocates say, acts of leadership at all levels will bubble to the surface, enhancing the school's effectiveness and relieving some of the principal's burdens.

How Are Leaders Being Developed?

Traditionally, professional development for school leaders has been front-loaded: a period of intense classroom study, followed by decades of sporadic "updating" on an eclectic series of topics with no systematic plan. In recent years, however, policymakers and practitioners have begun to realize the value of coherent professional development tailored to the needs of leaders and the students they serve.

Since districts can no longer assume that highly qualified leaders will appear on their doorstep when needed, many are filling the gap through home-grown professional development. When leaders are learners themselves, they are better able to empathize and serve as models when they ask teachers to rethink their practice.

One consequence has been a dramatic growth in formalized mentoring programs that are extended throughout the career cycle. Gary Crow and Joseph Mathews (1998) note that mentoring not only provides administrators with specific ideas and strategies, it encourages them to be more reflective and analytical about their practice. And the benefits run both ways, as the mentors themselves gain insights into their craft and enthusiasm about their profession.

Practitioners have also begun to formulate a "curriculum" for professional development (NAESP 2001). As such best-practice models are integrated with advanced certification programs, systematic professional development will become the norm rather than the exception.

How Are States Promoting and Supporting Leadership?

While school-leadership issues are most visible on the local level, state policies establish an essential framework that can either inhibit or enhance local efforts. The State Action for Educational Leadership Project (SAELP) has identified half a dozen areas where state action can make a difference (2001):

1. *Pointing a direction and setting priorities*. Through its policymaking and fiscal powers, the state can shape a comprehensive system that encourages coordination across state and local levels and creates greater coherence among the diverse reforms being implemented at any one time.

2. *Expanding the candidate pool*. States can make it easier for prospective administrators to enter the field. For example, Mississippi offers fully paid sabbaticals for candidates in full-time programs.

3. *Enhancing administrator training and professional development*. State rule-making power encompasses requirements for training. For example, Kentucky requires new superintendents to attend a regional training and assessment center and then take a comprehensive exam.

4. *Setting licensure, certification, and accreditation requirements*. States can upgrade preparation by revising licensure requirements. For example, Maryland requires entry-level administrators to pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment based on the ISLLC standards and bases renewal on documentation of an individualized professional development plan.

5. *Enhancing the conditions of practice*. States can help attract and retain good leaders by improving the conditions they work under. For example, Rhode Island has designed a plan for providing pension portability.

6. *Allocating legal authority*. States can maintain coherence in leadership systems by making sure that participants have the authority needed to meet expectations. For example, Kentucky has implemented a site-based decision model across the state, clearly defining the responsibilities of administrators, teachers, and community members while providing them with training.

Like most educational reforms, efforts to improve leadership are complex, diverse, and multilayered, but the efforts described in this *Digest* have one overarching theme: effective leadership is defined by student learning.

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